

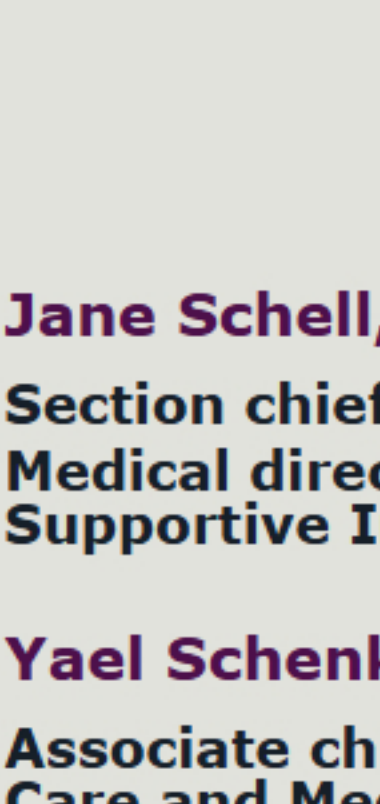
August 2025

Palliative Care News

Message from Jane and Yael



With the start of the new academic year, we are excited to welcome new faces and opportunities at the Section of Palliative Care, the Palliative Research Center (PaRC), and the UPMC Palliative and Supportive Institute (PSI).



Our mission is to educate the next generation of physicians and researchers, test innovative models of care, and provide high-value care to people living with serious illness and their caregivers.

In this newsletter, we also celebrate our accomplishments from the past few months, welcome new leadership transitions, and say goodbye to friends and co-workers who are leaving for new opportunities and retirement.

As we reflect on the past six months, we are grateful for the national recognition and publicity members of our team have received for their research and clinical work. We are energized and ready to tackle new challenges this fall.

Jane Schell, MD

Section chief, Palliative Care and Medical Ethics
Medical director, UPMC Palliative and Supportive Institute

Yael Schenker, MD

Associate chief of research, Section of Palliative Care and Medical Ethics
Director, Palliative Research Center (PaRC)

Supporting Palliative Care

Through education, research, community partners, and clinical programs, we are discovering and implementing innovative ways to enhance the quality of life for all patients and families living with serious illnesses.

Your gift matters.

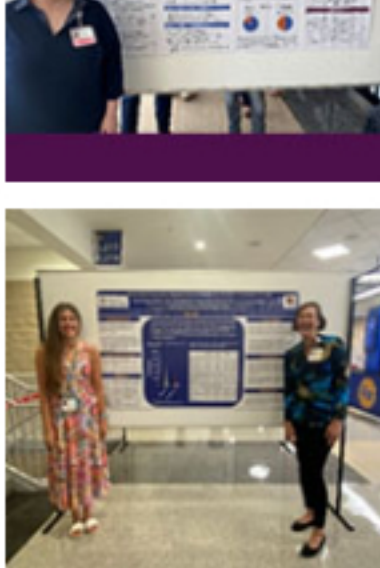
[Learn more](#)

Events



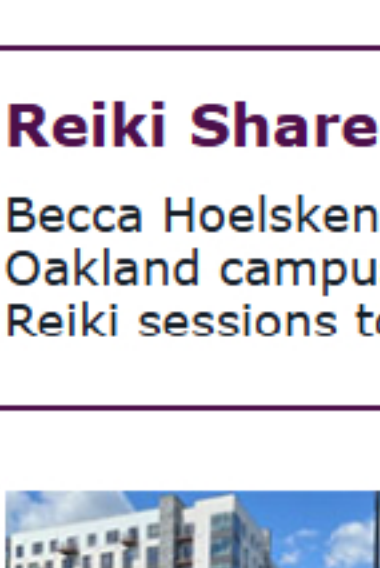
Humanism in Medicine

In February, the MusiCare program at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine held an evening of spoken words and music performance dedicated to celebrating the connection between music and the healing arts. Several palliative care providers participated in the music performance.



2025 AAHPM Annual Assembly

Palliative care was well-represented at the most recent American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine Assembly.

[Learn more](#)

Department of Medicine Grand Rounds

In April, Yael Schenker, MD, presented *Spreading the Wealth: Opportunities to Expand the Reach and Impact of Palliative Care* at the University of Pittsburgh Department of Medicine Grand Rounds.

[View the presentation](#)

Department of Medicine Research Day

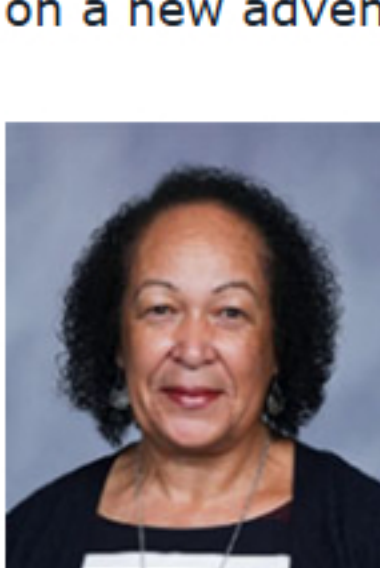
The 23rd annual University of Pittsburgh Department of Medicine Research Day occurred in April. The event showcased plenary and poster presentations.

Congratulations to all those from the Palliative Research Center (PaRC) and the Section of Palliative Care who presented posters at the most recent Research Day.

[View our presentations](#)

Reiki Share

Becca Hoelsken, CRNP, facilitated a Reiki share on our Oakland campus in February. Becca provided 20-minute Reiki sessions to 13 staff.



Rush to Crush Cancer Bike Ride

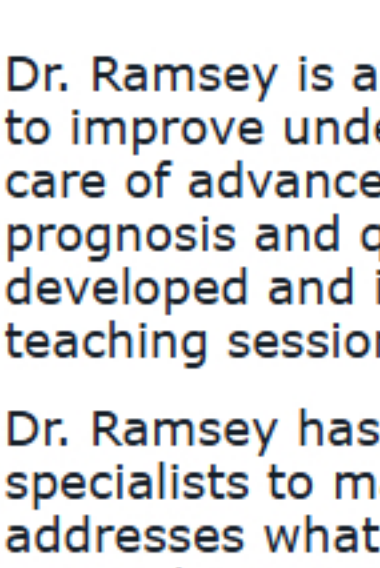
This annual event raises funds to support cancer research. Thanks to Yael Schenker, MD, for representing palliative care.



A Grateful Farewell

The palliative team gathered to share good wishes and congratulations with Richard Weinberg, MD, as he embarks on retirement and with Mamta Bhatnagar, MD, and Hailey Bulls, PhD, as they move on to new chapters in their lives.

Program Highlights



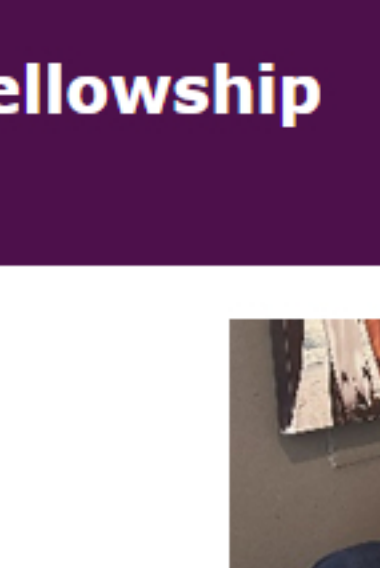
UPMC Hillman Cancer Center Partnership

Mamta Bhatnagar, MD, assumed the role of medical director for palliative care at UPMC Hillman Cancer Center in 2020. The last five years have proven a period of significant growth.

This growth has taken several forms. The team dedicated to palliative care at Hillman now sees more than 2,000 patients a year. Additionally, the team has:

- Expanded clinic reach using telemedicine to improve access to palliative care in rural communities and other previously underserved areas.
- Extended the scope of key stakeholders.
- Launched an outcomes and quality dashboard.

As of July 2025, Sinthana Ramsey, DO, Kendall Downer, MD, and Lisa Podgurski, MD, have joined the Palliative Care at UPMC Hillman team as Dr. Bhatnagar steps away to embark on a new adventure.



Ubuntu Pittsburgh Program Ambassador Profile

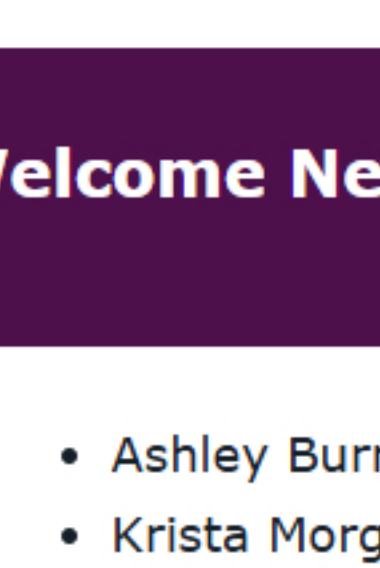
"We can't fix it, but we can walk with them, and they're not alone."

—Brenda Kirkland

As an Ubuntu Pittsburgh Program (UPP) Ambassador, Brenda provides compassionate support to Black women with advanced cancer in the Pittsburgh community. Learn more about her ambassador experience and the UPP program.

[Learn more](#)

Faculty Spotlight



Sinthana Ramsey, DO, is pursuing a master's degree in medical education. She received funding in conjunction with her thesis, *Improving Specialty Palliative Care Delivery to Patients with Advanced Solid Tumor Malignancies via a Curriculum on Oncology for Palliative Health Science Professionals*, from the UPMC Shadyside Hospital Competitive Research Fund.

Dr. Ramsey is applying the concept of bidirectional learning to improve understanding among her colleagues in palliative care of advancements in oncology that have changed prognosis and quality of life for patients dramatically. She developed and implemented a series of five 30-minute teaching sessions for practicing palliative care clinicians.

Dr. Ramsey has tapped into her relationships with oncology specialists to make sure her information is accurate and addresses what palliative care providers need to know. She notes that an oncologist has been present at each teaching session to field questions directly.

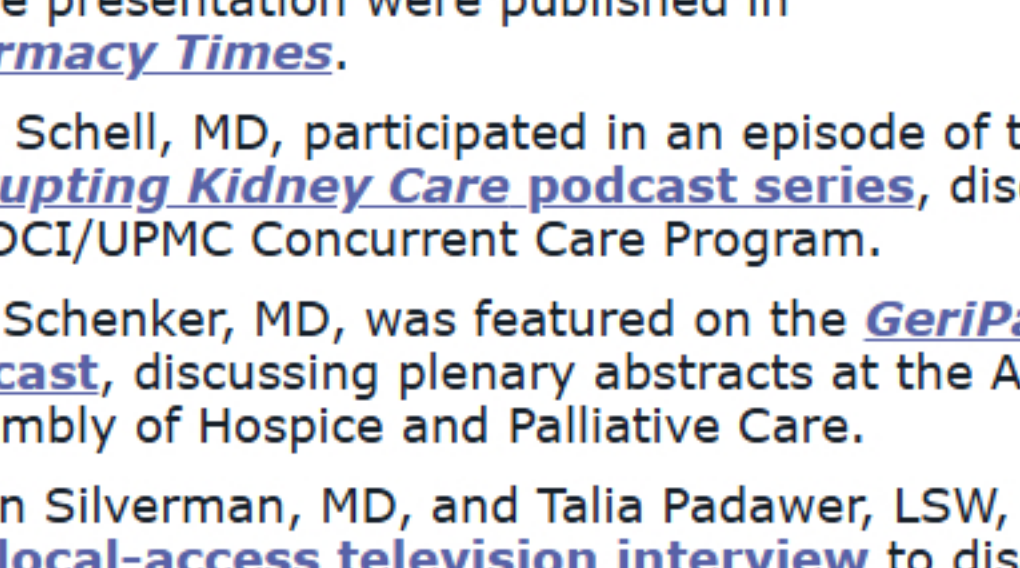
"I am realizing this pursuit is helping me be a better overall professional," Dr. Ramsey says. "I am learning about myself as a provider and a teacher and learning how to apply that in many ways. What a privilege and a humbling experience as a palliative care provider to keep learning things in new ways."

Training and Education

Social Worker Talk

Palliative care social workers gathered in February to focus on communication skills. They practiced communication in real time with simulated patients and coaching.

Fellowship



Best wishes to our 2024-2025 hospice and palliative medicine fellows!

Welcome to our incoming July 2025 fellows:

- Molly Mack, MD.
- Hayley Malkin, MD.
- Christopher Marino, MD.
- Ashley McLenithan, DO.
- Jordana Yahr, DO.

[View this collection of videos](#) to learn more about what distinguishes this amazing fellowship opportunity.

Welcome New Team Members

- Ashley Burns, CRNP, UPMC McKeesport/East/Passavant.
- Krista Morgan, CRNP, UPMC Presbyterian.
- Whitney Philipps, LSW, UPMC Shadyside.
- Lea Anne Raybuck, RN, palliative care nurse navigator.
- Courtney Wagner, MD, palliative care physician.

Awards and Appointments

Congratulations

- **Amar Bansal, MD**, has been appointed as associate medical director, Thrive.
- **Kendall Downer, MD**, has been appointed medical director, UPMC Hillman Palliative Malignant Hematology.
- **Linda King, MD**, has been appointed interim director, Outpatient Program.
- **Lars Margolis, MD**, was accepted into the Society of General Internal Medicine TEACH Certificate Program.
- **Gina Piscitello, MD**, has been appointed director, Palliative Care and Medical Ethics Evidence-Based Journal Club.
- **Sinthana Ramsey, DO**, has been appointed medical director, UPMC Hillman Cancer Center Palliative Care Program.
- **Ethan Silverman, MD**, was voted the incoming 2025 Education Special Interest Group chair-elect at the American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine.
- **Richard Weinberg, MD**, was awarded the Tara E. Cook Memorial Teaching Award.

Featured Media and Presentations

- Karl Bezak, MD, was interviewed along with four leaders of inpatient telepalliative care services around the country by the Center to Advance Palliative Care. They shared a [summary](#) of our innovative services and provided some guidance for other systems that hope to build their own service.
- Julie Childers, MD, was featured on the [GerIPal podcast](#) with colleagues, discussing palliative care for patients with substance use disorder.
- Rene Claxton, MD, was on [The Curbsiders Teach podcast](#) to talk about teaching communication with real-time feedback.
- Kendall Downer, MD, and Julie Childers, MD, published an editorial in the journal [Cancer](#).
- Maria Lowry, PharmD, presented at the recent Society of Pain and Palliative Care Pharmacists (SPPCP) Virtual Conference on mentorship in palliative care. Highlights of the presentation were published in [Pharmacy Times](#).
- Jane Schell, MD, participated in an episode of the [Disrupting Kidney Care podcast series](#), discussing the DCI/UPMC Concurrent Care Program.
- Yael Schenker, MD, was featured on the [GerIPal podcast](#), discussing plenary abstracts at the Annual Assembly of Hospice and Palliative Care.
- Ethan Silverman, MD, and Talia Padawer, LSW, took part in a [local-access television interview](#) to discuss palliative care.

Select Publications

- Amar Bansal, MD, had a [publication in Kidney360](#) titled "Improving Integration of Palliative Care and Nephrology."
- Yael Schenker, MD, University of Pittsburgh faculty and staff, clinicians from UPMC Hillman Cancer Center, as well as outside collaborators published "Facilitated Versus Patient-Directed Advance Care Planning Among Patients With Advanced Cancer: A Randomized Clinical Trial," in [JCO® Oncology Practice](#).
- Gina Piscitello, MD, wrote a [JAMA article](#) titled, "Addressing Inadequate Documentation of Unilateral Do-Not-Resuscitate Orders."
- Lisa Podgurski, MD, had a [paper published in The Journal of Pain and Symptom Management](#) titled "Primary Mental Health Competencies for Hospice and Palliative Medicine Physicians: A Delphi Study."
- Yael Schenker, MD, [wrote an article in the Journal of General Internal Medicine](#) titled "Private Equity's Growing Presence in Hospice Care: Clinical, Research, and Policy Considerations."
- [This thought piece in Kidney 360](#) on surgical pause in dialysis access is authored by our former fellow Amit Pujari, MD, as well as Jane Schell, MD, Dan Hall, MD, and Ted Yuo, MD.

Grants

- Gina Piscitello, MD, received \$25,000 from a donor to fund her project on "Identifying use of negative language in goals of care notes within the electronic health record."
- The UPMC Presbyterian palliative care team was awarded \$10,000 for a third year from the Ladies Hospital Aid Society for their Miracle Box project. The project, led by palliative care social worker Colleen Hutzler, MSW, LSW, enriches patients' and families' inpatient experiences by providing personalized complimentary bedside items and experiences that focus on symptom burden, connection, and bereavement support.